



Petrified Forest

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Summer



Autumn



Winter



Spring

Who Lives in Petrified Forest?

The Living Park

Although Petrified Forest is best known for its fossil clues to an ancient environment, it is also a living park. Despite its seemingly barren appearance, the grasslands of Petrified Forest National Park support hundreds of plant and animal species. Grasslands are one of the world’s most endangered ecosystems, fragmented by development, overgrazing, and overuse. Petrified Forest National Park preserves some of the best recovering fragments of native grassland in northeastern Arizona.

Residents

Too often, visitors hurry through the grassland. Take a moment to experience this surprisingly complex environment. Since the park has been protected from livestock-grazing for half a century, much of the natural diversity of the grassland has returned. The dominant plants are grasses, including over five dozen native species. Although the miniscule blossoms of grasses usually go unnoticed, other types of wildflowers are abundant throughout the wide-open spaces, such as luminous evening primrose, golden mariposa lily, and intensely blue flax. Larger shrubs form islands within the sea of grass, including several species of soft silvery sagebrush, saltbush



Like flames amidst the sagebrush and grasses, paintbrush (Castilleja species) are hemi-parasitic wildflowers that share nutrients of some of the native grassland shrubs.

festooned with papery seedpods, and rabbitbrush gilded with bright yellow flowers.

Some of the animals that visitors see in the park include pronghorn and prairie dogs. Pronghorn are permanent residents of the grassland, unique to this continent. These long legged hoofers are the fastest mammals in North America, sprinting over 60 mph. The bright white patches against their tan pelts are the best way to spot them against the gilded grasses of the prairie.

An important resident of the grassland, Gunnison’s prairie dogs occupy subterranean

apartment houses. Living in large communities—or “towns”—prairie dogs depend on each other for safety. While most of the town is feeding, guards watch for golden eagles, coyotes, and other predators. Any sign of danger raises the alarm, sending all the prairie dogs racing to the safety of their many burrows. Prairie dogs host dozens of other animal species, which find homes and food around the towns.

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Petrified logs bathed in late afternoon light against a late summer thunderstorm.

...even an hour’s hike or a leisurely drive in the Arizona grasslands will dispel any notions of flatland monotony. Here the incandescence of sidelit grassy hills during a thunderstorm and the orange-lavender stripes of sunset on a craggy horizon easily rival natural beauty elsewhere. In this wide-open habitat it’s not unusual. . .to spot distant pronghorn through binoculars, then realize they’ve long since checked you out.
~ Carl and Jane Bock, *The View from Bald Hill: Thirty Years in an Arizona Grassland*, 2000.